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Stanley Kaufmann on films

The Hour of the Furnaces

(Third World Cinema Group)

Ramparts of Clay

(Cinema V)

The Hour of the Furnaces is a film phenomenon and a phenomenal film. This Argentine documentary runs four hours and twenty minutes, plus two intermissions, and is a clear, unambiguous call for revolutionary violence. It was directed by Fernando Solanas, 35, who wrote the script with Octavio Getino, 36. (Solanas also photographed; Getino did the sound.) Both of them have been making short films in the past decade. Their work here is sometimes crude, sometimes suspect; and is certainly not unfailingly gripping, but they have made an impressive and vehement film of immense energy.

It has three main sections, "Neocolonialism and Violence," "Act for Liberation," "Violence and Liberation," and there are numerous subsections. To criticize the argument of the film calls for a knowledge of Argentina—and a copy of the script!—to which I won't pretend. The thesis, varied and repeated, supported with newsclips, commentaries, quotations, statistics, and interviews, can be stated fairly simply:

Argentina began as a Spanish colony and, after independence (1816), continued as an economic and cultural colony of Great Britain. The US developed great interests there and, through this century US power has supplanted British power, though the British still have a strong cultural hold. (See the dress and amusements of the upper class.)

The first really Argentine politics in Argentina was Peronism. Perón was maligned abroad, principally by the US, because his economic develop-

ment of the foreign debt, all interfered with foreign investments and control. The US conspired in the overthrow of Perón, nominally as a pro-democratic move, actually to install a regime more friendly to its influence. Post-Perón governments, like earlier ones, have been oligarchic, plutocratic, militaristic, and brutally repressive, and have depended heavily on outside cultural and economic resources. The largest political party in Argentina is still the Peronist one; it can be the spearhead of a people's revolution which is what is needed in all Latin America. "Two, three, more Vietnams," as Che said.

All the above is subject to some question, even on the basis of superficial knowledge like mine. But the size of the Peronist bloc (30 to 40 percent of the population) and the possible alliance between Peronism and the far left were reported in *The New York Times*, by Malcolm W. Browne, on Oct. 3, 1970. Anti-Americanism is a great unifying force among political factions in Latin America. If it be argued that there are Latin-American countries much worse off than Argentina, there is also a country—Uruguay—that has always been much better off; and see the recent history of their Tupamaros.

Besides the questions that may nevertheless be asked of the film's facts, there are also questions about their presentation. What's the point of the gory slaughterhouse scenes? Argentina lives by beef production, and will do so presumably under the most popular government. We are told ominously—twice—that four people die a minute in Latin America. By my figures, this is also the rate in the US. We are told that true culture depends on the complete liberation of man—in which case we will never have true culture. (I would have thought that one reason for art is that man is *not* completely liberated, and will not be.) We are shown a man being beaten by a group of men in mufti, then being dragged face down through the mud. How do we know that he wasn't a CIA agent who tried to get into a Peronist meeting? There are many instances of beating and gassing where sympathy is asked immediately for the victims, with no fixing of facts.

But, keeping one's guard up as well as possible, one still is overcome by a sense of selfish, cruel, exploitative power in the hands of a few. As usual

West, black or white or brown, there is no slightest reason to believe that the oppressed are the moral superiors of their oppressors and will behave better if and when they triumph; but that's hardly a reason for the oppressed to accept things as they are, particularly if they are the majority.

So we come to the nub of the matter: the advocacy of violence. In politics, I don't see how a view on violence can be held as a universal absolute, which is why many of us who object to the Vietnam war still do not call ourselves pacifists. The Argentine peasant, who has inherited generations of wretchedness, who has seen women and children machine-gunned by police, is in a very different emotional and, I think, moral position, in regard to violence, from the American university student who is (rightly) protesting the campus presence of Dow Chemical. Although it is chilling to see this film come *three times* to a climactic call for violent revolution, I think that, to deplore it in terms of the nonviolent campaigns which one advocates in the US, is almost to verge on the smug. It's a bit like people on a diet telling the underfed that they're better off thin. If violence is immoral, as it objectively is, we still have to recognize that there are situations where objectivity is impossible; that there are situations where violence may have to be used to drive out even greater immoralities.

In terms of cinema technique and imagination, Solanas has done everything he could to make his work a film—to break out of the old booby-trap of propaganda: which is that propaganda films rarely change anyone's mind, they only heat up the previously convinced or the susceptible. True, he says halfway through Part Two that his film is not for mere spectators, but I think that by then he hopes to have hooked those—Latin-Americans, anyway—who started as mere spectators. He has worked to make his picture *visually* interesting. He used to work on advertising films, and one can see it in his use of varying optical techniques for the many words on screen. The editing is sharp, often with staccato intercutting of action and verbal message. The sounds and songs are effective. (I should probably specify that it's all in Spanish with subtitles.)

And sometimes the film is genuinely beautiful. There's a well-composed, deep-focus scene in which an old

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